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Toward a Participative Integral Philosophy

Daryl S. Paulson, Ph.D.

A participative integral philosophy, as I view it, is broad-based, drawing from multiple disciplines. It is inclusive yet discriminating in valuing and ranking different perspectives. That valuing is not achieved through texts or algorithms but by each individual.

One of the first to articulate such a philosophy from a psychological perspective was Roberto Assagioli, founder of the humanistic-transpersonal psychology, psychosynthesis (Assagioli, 1965, 1973). He envisioned psychosynthesis as a positive and participative psychology for the “whole person,” that is, encompassing physical, emotional, mental, existential, social, and spiritual domains. Assagioli argued that each individual, based on his or her perspective, needs to choose authentically how growth and development will be completed.

In the east, Sri Aurobindo, an Indian educated in Britain in the late 19th century, returned to India, became a political radical trying to oust British rule from India, and was jailed as a terrorist for a year, awaiting his trial (Iyengar, 1985). While in the Alipore jail, he had a number of transcendental experiences, and they served as a catalyst for him to synthesize *purna* (Integral) *yoga*. Aurobindo developed *purna yoga* based on his interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, as well as other Vedanta texts. Its fundamental goal was to integrate both mundane and spiritual aspects of life (Aurobindo, 1970, 1997; Sharma, 2000). Prior to this time, yoga traditionally had been separated into various subpractices, including physical development (*hatha yoga*), emotional development (*bhakti yoga*), mental development (*jnana yoga*), and behavior development (*karma yoga*) (Narvane, 1964; Puligandlar, 1975). *Purna yoga* blended these yogic subdisciplines into a unified and balanced system that also included a two-directional life flow—an ascent toward the supermind and a descent of supermind into one’s lived life (Aurobindo, 1999).

Previously, yoga systems had focused on transcending mundane life to merge with the Divine, for exam-

ple, Sankara’s *Advaita Vandanta* (Satchid nandendra, 1997). Interestingly, this two-directional flow is also found in the expressed thoughts of Plato (Lovejoy, 1964) and Plotinus (1992). Aurobindo’s integral philosophy was ably presented in the United States by Haridas Chaudhuri. Chaudhuri and his wife established the Cultural Integration Fellowship, from which emerged an educational branch, later to become the present California Institute of Integral Studies (Chaudhuri, personal communication, 1992). Chaudhuri presented the major concepts of Aurobindo’s work through several books, including *Integral Yoga* (1965).

Robert Gerard, a one-time associate of Roberto Assagioli, developed an “Integral Psychology” that was a blend of psychosynthesis, depth psychology, humanistic-existential psychology, transpersonal psychology, and western esoteric traditions (Gerard, 1974; personal communication, 2004).

Ken Wilber has, since 1977, been a leader in transpersonal thought, but has officially abandoned it in favor of his version of integral thought (Wilber, 2000a, 2002a). In 1995, Wilber’s book, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (SES) presented an expansive and inclusive philosophic view that included a quadrant perspective encompassing Plato’s three life dimensions: the good (intersubjective dimension of shared meaning, values, and beliefs), the true (empirical dimension of observable truth), and the beautiful (personal subjective dimension of values, beliefs, meaning, and goals). Wilber soon expanded the concepts presented in SES through a series of other books, including *A Brief History of Everything* (1996), *The Eye of Spirit* (1997), *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (1998), *Integral Psychology* (1999), *A Theory of Everything* (2000b), and *Boomeritis* (2002b).

Integral Philosophy

So far, we have discussed spiritual and psychological aspects of integral philosophy; now let us look at philosophy.

Philosophy has been defined as the pursuit of wisdom, but this seems no longer true, at least for mainstream academic philosophers, because they must demonstrate proof of their philosophical progress through publications, if they are to survive in academia. It is far easier to accomplish this with small steps, rather than addressing head-on the ineffable “what is.” As James Ogilvy stated (1992, p. xv), “Philosophy as the love of wisdom is as ridiculous in the academy as romantic love in a bordello.” Nevertheless, from an integral perspective, a theoretical philosophical goal is to integrate the Good, the True, and the Beautiful into a seamless whole. And, although the Platonic terms good, true, and beautiful are rarely used in contemporary discourse, the concepts are (Smith, 1997). For example, the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory characterizes these terms as technical understanding (the true); practical understanding (the good), also termed mutual understanding; and emancipatory understanding (the beautiful) (Habermas, 2003; McCarthy, 1978; Wilber, 1995). By the way, the good, the true, and the beautiful, in this paper, correlate to three world domains: intersubjectivity, objectivity, and subjectivity.

Wisdom is also an important characteristic of participatory integral philosophy, particularly in terms of its praxis (Ferrer, 2000). It includes the ability to manage secular aspects of life, in a context of knowledge and lived experience, grounded in spiritual themes (Holiday & Chandler, 1986). Participatory wisdom, as applied in contemporary life, seems to require both pragmatism and resilience in order to work through experiences of frustration, successfully dealing with existential issues in one’s life. This includes dealing with problems that arise and learning to revise one’s own cherished concepts in light of new discoveries (Daniels & Horowitz, 1984; Habermas, 2003; Paulson, 2001). From a humanistic perspective, humans want to make sense of their lives and to know and feel that their pursuits are both significant and worthwhile (Washburn, 2003). Yet, participatory wisdom is not the pursuit of happiness, *per se*. It is, instead, a “knowing” of what produces happiness and what produces results, combined with the ability and desire to *act* in relation to that knowledge (Holiday & Chandler, 1986). The action component is often dismissed, as if the acquisition of knowledge were “good enough.” Action, or application, is fundamental to the practice of participatory integralism (Paulson, 2002).

Philosophies have developed, more or less, as closed theoretical systems, exemplified in the works of great luminaries down through the ages. These luminaries and their work include Confucius; the Vedic Scholars; the logic of the Sophists and Protagoras; Socrates and the dialectic process; Plato and justice, the state, and virtue; Aristotle and material, formal, efficient, and final causes; Buddha and the four noble truths; the hedonistic visions of Epicurus; the stoic visions of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius; the religious scholarship of Aquinas; Descartes and rationalism; the skepticism of Hume, Locke, and Berkeley; the universalism of Kant; the pragmatism of William James; the class struggle and materialism of Marx; the nihilism and will to power of Nietzsche; the existential perspectives of Kierkegaard and Sartre; and the relativistic themes of many postmodern advocates, such as Foucault, Deleuze, Barthes, and Lyotard (Beck & Holmes, 1968; Best & Kellner, 1991). These various philosophies contain interesting and important theoretical propositions, but for individual application, many of the concepts are too abstract.

From the end of the Greek state to the present, humans have tended to value one worldview domain over the other two (Tarnas, 1991; Toynbee, 1995; Wilber, 1998, 2002b). In fact, these domains were no longer distinct in theory or praxis until around the sixteenth century. Western civilization, it seems, tacitly viewed intersubjectivity, the domain of religion, as the “real” and ignored the other two domains. Religion provided the purpose and meaning to life, codes for ethical living, a justice system, and an intellectually satisfying hierarchical map of the world, seen and unseen, beginning with matter, then plants, animals, humans, the clergy, the angelic hierarchy, and, finally, God. This structure was known as the “great chain of being” (Lovejoy, 1964). Subjectivity and objectivity, for the most part, seem to have been but appendages of religious intersubjectivity. This is a rather general statement, for there certainly was more to the intersubjectivity perspective than merely church doctrine: for example, state doctrine, which was also grounded in intersubjectivity. Individual meaning and beliefs seem to be injunctions of church doctrine (Frend, 1984; Tillich, 1968). When people expressed this individual view too forcefully, they were viewed with suspicion and scorn, and sometimes even roasted at the stake. Objective reality was also explained in terms of religious doctrine, which described creation (Lindberg, 1992).

Yet by the sixteenth century, a few radicals began to question church doctrine, not with another doctrine, but by actually observing physical phenomena (Gower, 1997). To the chagrin of both they and the Church, their observations of the world and the church doctrine describing it did not generally agree. Something had to give, and it ultimately was religion. Science began its ascent as the torch-bearer of reality, grounded in observation and measurement. Over time, religion gave way to science as “reality.” The importance of personal independent subjectivity also emerged, particularly in pursuits such as phenomenology and psychology (Smith, 1997).

Yet, even today, proponent disciplines within each life domain have generally ignored proponent disciplines grounded in the others, or attacked them through polemic discourse (Davidson, 2001; McCarthy, 1978). The latter has occurred vehemently in academia, as departments grounded in each of the three worldviews argue to justify their existence, that is, funding. Objective empirical science, however, is currently the main academic reality. Science, as a way of acquiring objective knowledge, is extremely powerful, and contemporary societies rest on its technical applications. From computers to cell phones, from jet travel to backpacking with global positioning systems, to landing probes on Mars, science has impacted and changed our lives more than any of the other two domains.

Humanistic-existential, depth, and transpersonal psychologists often privilege subjectivity as the most “real” domain, contending that subjective values and meaning cannot be ignored without peril (Vaillant, 1993). In fact, they point out that the majority of people they counsel have become dysfunctional, depressed, anxious, unhappy, and unfulfilled because of the lack of feeling genuine self-acceptance, a subjective concern (Bugental, 1981; Paulson, 2004; Schneider & May, 1995). Additionally, some argue that phenomena do not exist if there is not someone to perceive and experience them. For example, Yalom (1980), some years ago, realized, while snorkeling in the ocean, that its beautiful life forms were beautiful only because he viewed them so. Similarly, Nietzsche (1995) described Zarathustra’s reentry into the world from a ten-year retreat as stopping before the sun and saying: “You great star, what would your happiness be had you not those for whom you shine?” (p. 9).

Some postmodern philosophers—deconstruction-

alists, in particular—view intersubjectivity as the most “real.” But they also claim that there is no solid reality, because everything is relative. For them, meaning exists in the universe only via constructed language, a shared system of linguistic codes and signs (Best & Kellner, 1991; Culler, 1982). Humans use language to construe meaning, not the reverse. The “linguistic turn” has convinced most that, to a very large degree, it is language, not observation or subjective awareness, that constructs one’s perceived reality. Inner reality is mediated by shared linguistic codes (Best & Kellner, 1991; Katz, 1978). Yet, the objective world, in a fundamental sense, is pre-given and not dependent on one’s inner reality. Humans did not construct the objective world, but, instead, find themselves here in it. No matter how linguistically one construes being shot in the head, the result is the same: the end. It is humans who construct intersubjective, social reality—status, monetary exchange, social rules of conduct, and cultural beliefs. Let us now turn our attention to practical life concerns.

Contemporary Life

Our contemporary life is claimed to overload humans with information, choice, responsibility, and contingency. For many, just to pay their bills and taxes requires holding multiple jobs. Governmental agencies impose ever more control over citizens through surveillance and laws. Contemporary life requires workforce members to witness the vaporization by the thousands of traditional full-time, full-benefit jobs, perhaps even their own, to make way for part-time, no-benefit jobs. Contemporary life is permeated by an ominous, yet elusive, threat of yet another deadly terrorist attack. It requires citizens to accept the trampling of ecological systems and their stewardship under the guise of “progress.” But what is this progress? It is unrestrained urban sprawl? Is it dumping industrial waste without regard for future consequences?

We find that the world presented to us by our parents, teachers, and religions does not exist, and many cannot find a substitute with merit. So, like the masses described in Dostoevsky’s (1949) *The Brothers Karamazov*, all too often, we rely on the voice of authority to shoulder the problems. Instead of accepting freedom, choice, and the responsibility, too many allow today’s “Grand Inquisitors”—political, scientific, and religious leaders, to tell them what to believe, what

is true, what to do, who is good, who is bad or “evil,” what their duties are, and even who they are. Yet too many continue to be unhappy, unfulfilled, self-depreciated, and empty.

There is no escape from our increasing responsibilities and the risks accompanying them, but to cope, we often need to compartmentalize many areas of our lives. We construct professional roles to isolate us from subordinates. We ignore the homeless, even shun them as being lazy, while knowing, deep in our hearts, that we, too, tragically could be there. We tend to view the truth from a partial perspective and claim it is “The Truth.” But too often, we cannot even find partial truth, only a story. At some point, we tire of the stories and justifications provided by others. It is then that one must decide to see for oneself “what is.” But where does one begin? Integral philosophy states it is within oneself, where one is situated (Assagioli, 1965; Ferrer, 2000).

With this said, let us return to Wilber’s theoretical perspective, because his model has much to offer to a participatory integral philosophy. Wilber, as does Arthur Koestler (1964), views phenomena as at once both whole and part; that is, a “holon.” An electron, for example, is a whole electron but part of an atom; an atom is a whole atom but part of a molecule; a molecule is a whole molecule but part of an organelle; an organelle is a whole organelle but part of an organ (Wilber, 1995). Additionally, humans experience both a subjective (interior) and objective (exterior) perspective of existence. Humans live as individuals, as well as in collectives of humans (Wilber, 1999). Moreover, the collective consists of an interior intersubjective and an exterior interobjective domain generally referred to as culture and society. Putting these concepts together, a four-domain reality emerges, which can be mapped as a square divided into four equal quadrants.

The *part* represents an individual human being and the *collective*, a society. The *subjective* characterizes both the interior of an individual and that of the collective (intersubjective), while the *objective* characterizes the exterior domain of both an individual and the collective (interobjective). However, the concept of *collective* is a relative one, for it can consist of several humans, a small social group, an age group, a community, or even all of humanity.

Wilber’s upper left quadrant (the individual subjective domain) represents the first-person (“I”) interior perspective, experienced through one’s conscious

awareness, sense of self, emotions, goals, meaning, aspirations, values, and memory (Wilber, 1995). Wilber’s upper right quadrant (the individual objective domain) is a third-person, singular view, described in “it” terms. It includes one’s physical body, organ systems, cells, and brain structures, and one’s overt behavior. The lower left quadrant (the intersubjective collective domain) is expressed in second-personal, plural, “we” terms, representing shared values, goals, meaning, worldviews, beliefs, aspirations, and language. The lower right quadrant (the interobjective collective domain) is described in third-person plural terms and represents “things,” such as geophysical structures (mountains), geopolitical structures (India), laws, social structures, social behaviors, and social systems.

Each of these quadrants interacts with the others. So “reality” must take into account all four domains. No quadrant domain can be reduced and explained solely in terms of another quadrant domain. For example, our subjective feelings have physical biochemical correlates but cannot be completely explained by biochemistry.

Wilber’s quadrant model is theoretically satisfying, but so what? By itself, is it not merely one more way of constructing a worldview, albeit a larger one? What positive applied or participative value does it provide? Wilber asserts his theories are applicable and that they have been applied (Wilber, 2000b). This is certainly true. This author has applied his theoretical models to business, clinical trials of antimicrobial products used in surgical environments, biostatistical research designs, marketing strategies, and near death studies (Paulson, 1996, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2003a, 2003b). Yet there is a problem in that Wilber’s model lacks emphasis to empower an individual to authentically coparticipate in life.

Wilber’s integral philosophy, in its theoretical form, is a ready-made system, not one codeveloped by the individual participating in life through lived experiences. It thus falls short of a participatory integral philosophy. To be a participatory philosophy and, hence, of more personally authentic value, it needs to empower individuals to find their own authentic ways of knowing, learning, and dealing with life, and to value them (Ferrer, 2003a,b; Paulson, 2001).

Conclusion

A participatory philosophy of integralism is one that is to be authentically applied mindfully in one's life process. There is the ever-present need to learn from other views, from other individuals, and from history (Tarnas, 1991). This learning can lead not just to the accumulation of knowledge or of construed systems but also to acquired practical wisdom. A participatory integral philosophy, then, is a living philosophy, one that never becomes a finished product. It is a multi-perspective philosophy, providing an enlarged view of "what is," but a "what is" from the inner reference of a human agent, not from highjacking textual doctrine (Ferrer, 2003a,b; Murphy, 1992; Paulson, 2001). There is no one, in the end, who can own responsibility for one's life except oneself, the individual. This paper is not a final answer but a plea for others to join into dialogue in search of developing a participatory integral philosophy.

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